

Someone Else's Dragon

Being with fear, creating boundaries, building empathy,
preparing for Halloween, navigating other people's fears



A long time ago, in a village to the far north, there was a six-year-old girl named Solvei who was the youngest in her family. She lived with her mother and father and older brothers Hagen and Aren in a stone house near the edge of a vast forest. Their house was very simply built out of piled stones mortared together with straw and mud waddling. The roof consisted of long ashwood beams supporting grass sod that soaked up the rain during the warmer months and held the snow during the cold months.

There was a large garden outside their home where they grew carrots and parsnips and potatoes and radishes and many varieties of greens - which - aside from what they were able to hunt - was their source of food for the entire year.

Solvei's family worked hard - as did all the families in this village to the far north. They worked hard to maintain their own home and family and they worked hard to help the families and their houses in the rest of the village. The winters were long and very cold, so it was extremely important that they be prepared with a storage of food and firewood.

Now it is true that people around the world have a different sense of the seasons of the year. There are parts of the world where there are four balanced seasons called Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter - and there are other parts of the world where the year is divided according to the amount of rain - the rainy season and the dry season. Where Solvei's family lived, people divided the year in half: there was the growing season and the dark time. The growing season started as soon as the ice thawed and the rivers started to flow again. Seedlings were prepared and once the ground was soft enough, it was tilled and planted and tended every day. The growing season lasted several months and because there was so much light, they could grow great quantities of food. The days were very long and it wasn't uncommon for people to go to sleep before the sun was fully set.

The dark times began when the temperature dropped, the gardens stopped growing and the days became shorter and shorter and the nights longer and longer. This was a quiet time and a still time when families gathered together around fires and told stories to the young - about their grandparents and their grandparents' grandparents and about a time when things were very different than they were then.

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Most of all the dark time was a time when the people needed to take care of each other – needed to protect each other from the cold and stay warm and fed. As I said, the dark time required a lot of preparation – not only to make sure they had enough food and firewood – but also to prepare for the darkness itself.

You see things are different in the dark. We can't see very well when the light is dim and sometimes we can't see anything at all. When that is the case, our eyes can play tricks on us and we think we see something that isn't really there. We wonder – is that my uncle, or is it a tree? Is that my cow or is it a rock? And since this land was shared with bears and wolves who preferred to be left alone, the people had to be careful. Was that a bear? Was that a wolf? During the dark time, it was often hard to tell.

So what the people of Solvei's village did to prepare for the dark time, as they held a festival. There was a big bonfire in the center of the village where all the families would gather for singing and dancing and games and sharing a harvest meal. Everyone was welcome until the sun began to set and then the festival changed. The younger children would return home with one of their parents or grandparents or aunts and uncles while all the other grown-ups and the older children would begin the second part of the festival. This second part honored the dark time and everyone in the village agreed that this was not appropriate for younger children. The reason it was not appropriate was because of the costumes. You see this part of the festival looked a little like our Halloween in that everyone wore scary costumes. But the difference is that every single one of the grown-ups and older children created a costume that was based on something they feared – something that was specifically scary for them.

For instance, Solvei's uncle was afraid of bears. When he was little he saw a giant bear catching fish along the river and it scared him – ever since then he had been afraid of bears. So every year for the festival, her uncle would dress up like a bear because it helped him become less afraid of bears. By pretending to be a bear, he understood the bear a little better, and then bears weren't so scary for him. He had fewer bad dreams about bears and when he walked through the forest during the dark time, he had fewer worries about seeing a bear. This was the reason everyone wore costumes. Some dressed like bears, some dressed like wolves, some dressed like weasels and some dressed like poisonous snakes – but by far, the most popular costume for this festival was a dragon. There were lots of dragon costumes – dragons with sharp teeth, dragons with fiery breath, dragons with wings, dragons with scales, big dragons, little dragons, blue dragons, red dragons, ice dragons, and wind dragons. Unlike the bear and wolf and ice and snow and wind creatures, the dragons represented more personal fears. If someone was afraid of a wolf, then they would dress like a wolf – but if someone was afraid of being alone or getting lost or afraid of the dark, then they would create a dragon costume. They would make a dragon that looked like their fear. They would choose the colors and decorations according to how they made them feel.

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Solvei's oldest brother Hagen had been to the festival for the past two years and both years he dressed as a red fire-breathing dragon because he was afraid of getting burned by fire. When he was young, he burned a finger on red-hot coal and since then he has always been nervous around fires. Solvei watched as he dyed the flax cloth with beets and then dried out a slurry made of mashed willow bark and made a thin, crinkly paper that he used to look like fire. Solvei was fascinated with the process and wanted to see him wear the costume.

"May I please come?" she asked her mother, "I want to see Hagen's dragon - why can't I see?"

"You are too young Solvei" explained her mother, "The dark festival is only for older children and grown-ups. You are not ready to see all the dragons"

"When will I be ready?" she asked repeatedly.

"When you are older," she said, "When you can tell which dragons are yours and which dragons belong to someone else. This is difficult to do, Solvei, and I do not want you to become afraid of things that are not yours to fear."

Well - this was not at all satisfying to Solvei and it actually made her even more curious. She started peeking in the other homes to see what kinds of costumes people were making. She asked her uncle if she could see his bear costume. He said no. She asked Kaari, one of the storytellers, if she could see her ice dragon costume and she said no. When she spotted her father's wolf costume, he quickly hid it away. When she caught a glimpse of her grandmother's blue open-water dragon, her mother said,

"Solvei, you must be patient - just as all of us have been patient before you. There is a right time to join in the festival and you must wait until that time"

This was very discouraging to Solvei and what made it even worse was that this was going to be her brother Aren's first year attending. He was 9 years old and his mother and father decided he was ready to go. Solvei knew that Aren was afraid of being alone in the forest - he always needed to see his older brother or an adult when he walked the paths. So when it was time for him to choose his costume, he chose the lonely dragon.

"I think lonely dragons are purple," he said confidently, "And they carry a mist or fog around their head because they are always alone."

Solvei watched as her mother and father helped Aren make his costume with a veil made of her grandmother's milkweed lace. Solvei watched and studied and most of all she got more and more upset and envious. She wanted more than anything to attend.

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And so, when the day of the festival finally arrived, she decided quietly to herself that she would sneak away that night just to have a quick peek. The Bonfire was not far from her home, just at the edge of the woods by her aunt's home - so she knew she would be able to leave and return without her aunt knowing she was gone. Once she made this decision, she became happy and excited - her first glimpse! How wonderful!

When the festival finally began, everyone was in attendance. The bonfire was lit and Solvei joined all the other children in singing and dancing and then she returned to her family for the big feast. They all ate roasted carrots and parsnips, a big venison stew, pickled turnips, and grilled potatoes. They had mugs of sweet oat porridge for dessert and the family festival ended when the sun started to set and everyone sang a song of gratitude to the light and a welcome to the dark. Then it was time to say goodnight to the younger children who returned to their homes for some quiet time and then sleep.

Solvei's aunt Eula brought her home and then helped her to bed. Solvei slept on a linen bed stuffed with straw and the sweetest dried clover and usually, she looked forward to snuggling in and closing her eyes. This night, however, little Solvei watched and waited for her aunt to fall asleep. She watched as Eula's eyes got heavier and heavier until she could hear her gentle snoring.

Then as quiet as a mouse she slid out of the straw bed, pulled on her deer hide coat and leather boots and went outside. It was much colder out now and she breathed in the crisp air. She smiled - she was excited.

Solvei followed the thin path that led to her aunt and uncle's house at the edge of the open space where the festival was being held. She decided she would hide behind the house, and peek around the corner at the costumes - that way she could see everything and no one would see her. As she got closer she heard singing and drumming and some whistles being blown. She reached her aunt's and uncle's house and inched slowly along the cool stone wall until she could see the amber glow of the bonfire. Then she saw the shadows. They were hard to see clearly - the shadows were moving and did not look like the heads and arms and legs of people. No, she saw shadows of wings and long necks and twisted tails and horns - they seemed to be the shadows of creatures.

That was when she felt the first tingle of fear move through her. Up until that point, she only felt excitement and adventure, but now she felt a little scared. She wondered for a second if this was such a good idea and considered going back to her home. But her curiosity was greater than her doubt and she took two more steps forward.

And that was when she saw them.

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She knew that the creatures she saw were people she knew and loved. She knew that they included her mother and father and brothers and friends. She knew all that, but that still didn't prepare her for the sight of all the dragons and bears and wolves and weasels dancing and screeching and laughing in front of her. She spotted her brother Hagen's red dragon and her brother Brent's purple dragon. She spotted her uncle's bear and her father's wolf and the storyteller's open sea dragon. She knew who they were but at that moment it didn't matter. At that moment Solvei was scared. With eyes wide, she covered her mouth - and then ran as fast as she could to her house. When she reached the thick wooden door, she did not ease it open quietly - no, she pushed through and ran into her aunt's arms.

"What - what is it, child? What has happened?" her aunt asked in surprise.

Solvei held her tight and said only, "Dragons"

"Dragons?" asked her aunt. And when she saw the open door, she realized what had happened.

"Did you go to the festival Solvei?"

Solvei was quiet for a moment and then she nodded her head.

"Oh dear," said her aunt quietly, "my my"

Her aunt continued to hold Solvei until her mother and father and brothers returned from the festival and entered with rosy cheeks and wide satisfied smiles.

Solvei's aunt quietly told her mother what had happened and with a sweet smile to Solvei, went outside to walk home.

While her father helped the boys to bed, Solvei's mother held her tight for a long time.

"I'm scared" Solvei finally said, "I wish I stayed home."

"Mmmm" said her mother softly, "But you did not stay home and now, you have someone else's dragon."

Solvei frowned a little and leaned back to look at her mother.

"What?" she asked quietly.

"You are young Solvei," said her mother, "And you are not old enough to know what is your dragon - your fear - and the fears of others. So now you have someone else's dragons - perhaps many dragons and we are going to give them back before you go to sleep tonight."

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"I don't want to go to sleep," Solvie said with a frown.

"You will when you give the dragons back," said her mother, "But it might take some time. Come with me"

Then her mother wrapped her in her deerskin coat and helped her pull on her boots. She put on her own boots and then held Solvei's hand as the two of them went back outside.

"I don't want to go to the fire," said Solvei nervously.

"That will be the first dragon we must give back," said her mother. Solvei looked up and in the dim starlight, she could see that her mother was smiling. They came to the fire and Solvei could feel all the fear again. She remembered the swirling wings and tails and horns and the fiery breath of the dragons and bears and wolves that danced around the fire. When Solvei shivered, her mother picked her up and held her close.

"Tell me everything that you saw," her mother said.

"I saw the fire dragon," said Solvei remembering her brother's costume.

"And what happened when you saw the fire dragon," asked her mother.

"I was scared ... I thought if I touched it I might get burned."

"Yes," said her mother, "That is Hagen's dragon and his fear - it's time to give it back."

Then her mother pulled a small acorn from her pocket and handed it to Solvei. "I want you now to say, 'this is Hagen's dragon and I give it back to him then I want you to toss that into the fire.'"

"Ok," said Solvei who looked at the acorn, "This is Hagen's dragon and I give it back to him." She then tossed the acorn into the fire where she heard it snap and crackle as it burned.

"Do you think you will be burned now?" asked her mother.

Solvei took a breath in and realized that she wasn't afraid of being burned anymore. "No - I feel better" she said with a smile.

"Good" said her mother smiling back, "Tell me what else you saw."

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Then the two of them did the same thing for the bear, the wolf, the open sea dragon, the purple lonely dragon, and so many other dragons and creatures until she could remember nothing more.

"Is all the fear gone?" her mother asked holding her tight.

Solvei took more deep breathes and then said, "I saw shadows before and I am still a little scared of those."

Solvei's mother nodded her head and said, "Well, you might find - when you are older that shadows might be your dragon. You might make a shadow dragon to wear at the festival. But Solvei, for that you must wait. When you are old enough, there will be no fear when you see the others in their costumes because you will know that it is their dragon. And you will have your own. No need to burn the acorns. In fact, you'll see that it is a lot of fun". Then her mother smiled again.

Solvei nodded, smiled and then yawned. "I'm really tired" she said before taking a deep breath.

"Yes" said her mother who gave her another squeeze tight, "Let's go home."

They walked together under the sky filled with stars. She marveled at the bright shimmering lights that dimly illuminated the houses of her village. She smiled at the crisp air and piney smell of forest beyond. As she and her mother entered their house, she yawned again and walked straight to her bed. Her mother tucked her in and sat with her as she closed her eyes.

And as little Solvei fell asleep, she recalled the festival. She recalled the food and the singing and then she recalled the costumes. She remembered all the costumes and marveled that she no longer scared her. They were only ... costumes. Then she thought about the shadow dragon. Yes, she still felt a twinge of fear around the shadows but she also felt possibility. Maybe it was the dragon she would make one day. Maybe it was her dragon. And with a smile on her face, she fell peacefully and gratefully asleep.